Caps, Ladders and Airplanes

Idea In Short

Segment learners by the job they need done, not by geography or age. Graduates hire consulting skills to win offers, corporate professionals hire them to get more done and entrepreneurs hire them to grow. Most careers now cycle through all three, so keep learning, leading and building simultaneously.

Consultants think in buckets, and the useful bucket here comes from Clayton Christensen's jobs to be done [JTBD] framework, which asks what job customers hire a product to perform.1 Applied to consulting education, three archetypes emerge.

Green Cap: Get the Job Offer

The graduation cap crowd consists of undergraduate and graduate students mounting a full-scale assault on the job market. They conduct informational interviews, read research reports and re-craft resumes with visible eagerness. They have learned many disparate things, and now the cooking skills face a real kitchen. Their unfair advantage is super learning mode, the trained ability to absorb content, take notes and retain. Their challenge is that consulting material can feel theoretical when the personal sample size is one or two internships and perhaps a single non-consulting job.

Blue Ladder: Get More Done

The corporate ladder describes most people. They hold a steady job or, if fortunate, a career. They know how to work with bosses and vendors, have earned raises and promotions and may have survived a layoff. They remember offsite meetings, corporate training, the Y2K ramp-up, enterprise resource planning [ERP] rollouts or the 2008 global financial crisis. Their unfair advantage is content, deep knowledge of an industry, product, company and competitor set built over years. Their challenge is application, since the connection between consulting tools and Tuesday morning's to-do list is not always

obvious. Semiconductor equipment planning, agricultural pricing and healthcare consulting all taught the same lesson: the frameworks land hardest when tied to work the learner already owns.

Red Airplane: Grow, Grow, Grow

The solo airplane flies entrepreneurs. Some run a one-person shop as a second career after retiring from the first, perhaps as an executive coach. Others keep salaried employment while building freelance income on the side. The unfair advantage is autonomy. You finally got your wish and became the chief executive, chief financial officer and chief operating officer at once, in the spirit of Gary Vaynerchuk's crush-it ethos. The challenge is equally plain. The work multiplies, the risk concentrates and the road gets lonely. Ramping a business alone tests skills no corporate job fully develops.

Five Transitions Between Archetypes

Real careers move between the three. The graduate who lands the offer must now survive the first year, where classroom concepts need tact. Mentioning disruptive innovation to a boss during month one is unwise, since nobody wants to cannibalize their most profitable products. The questions become how to start well and how to network internally. The corporate climber who wants a different ladder faces translation problems. The first job came through campus recruiting, and the next one demands mapping skills and relationships onto new industries, locations and roles.

The climber who jumps to the airplane after 15 years of corporate life confronts harder arithmetic. What are you uniquely good at, who are the first three customers and can the balance sheet survive 18 months without income while the pipeline builds? Prospects need a taste of the work before they buy it. The veteran entrepreneur sometimes returns to the green cap, because times change. Clients want different things, and generative tools like ChatGPT make yesterday's good work nearly free on the internet. Retooling means metacognition, thinking about your own thinking, plus a steady diet of books and long-form interviews.

The most relevant archetype combines all three. Professionals now learn continuously, lead teams and build a business around themselves at the same time. Three habits keep the combination healthy. Use generative Artificial Intelligence [AI] tools now, because the

usefulness is remarkable and fear is a poor strategy. Build your network deliberately or become a grain silo, rich and full and solitary. Put your thoughts on paper, since unrecorded insight evaporates and written insight builds influence.

Why the Archetypes Matter for Teams

Leaders who manage mixed teams gain something practical from this segmentation. A team usually contains all three archetypes at once, and each responds to different incentives. Green caps need structured feedback and visible skill progression, because learning velocity is their currency. Blue ladders need their industry knowledge honored and connected to new tools, since nothing alienates an experienced professional faster than training that ignores what they already know. Red airplanes, including the contractors and fractional experts on modern teams, need clear scope and autonomy rather than supervision. Staffing decisions, training budgets and even meeting design improve when leaders ask which job each person is hiring the work to do. The same logic guides content creators, educators and anyone selling expertise. Know the job, and the audience finds you.

Everything Is Education Selling

All three archetypes converge on the same craft. Learn constantly to stay ahead and find novel ways to add client value. Work in teams, because one person is not leverage. Stay clear on why any company hires you and what value you drive. Reverse-engineer the client's situation and ask how to help them succeed. Then explain the so-what simply to clients and prospects. Albert Einstein set the standard for that last skill: "If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough."2 The archetypes differ in age, badge and business card. The underlying job, teaching your way into trust, never changes.

- 1Know Your Customers' Jobs To Be Done
- 2Albert Einstein

Summary

Green caps chase offers, blue ladders chase impact and red airplanes chase growth. Careers now cycle through all three archetypes, sometimes at once. Use generative AI, build

networks thoughtfully and write your thinking down. Every archetype converges on the same craft: education-based selling.